Planning June 2007

Family Friendly
Parents with young children are saying yes’ to downtown living, Isabelle Groc reports.

Why Raise Your Kids in the Suburbs?

Putting Child Care in the Picture
Why this service is a critical part of community infrastructure. A Planning Practice by Mildred Warner, Kristen Anderson, and George Haddow.

A Rural Problem, Too
Paul Rollinson explains homelessness beyond the big cities. An Overlooked America story.

It’s Bustling Beyond the Arch
Charlene Prost takes a tour of downtown St. Louis.

Texas Turns on the Tap
Kevin Kluge explains how water planning works in his drought-prone state. Elizabeth Lunday notes what happens when local plans collide.

Small Town Design: Getting It Right
Advice from the authors of a new Planners Press book.

Brew Meisters
A family-owned chain does a lively business in the Pacific Northwest. Samuel Adams Beresky checks it out.

Blight Fight
Detroit’s aggressive approach to nuisance abatement is sparking some redevelopment. Andrew Dick reports.

The American Planning Association provides leadership in the development of vital communities by advocating excellence in community planning, promoting education and citizen empowerment, and providing the tools and support necessary to effect positive change.

Perspectives
A bimonthly column by Paul Farmer, APA’s executive director and CEO.

News
Sacred land, employer-assisted housing.

Letters
Fact versus opinion, megapolitan.

Planners Library
Democracy’s future, cities and public health.

Viewpoint
The Virginia Tech community

Cover: Children wading in a fountain. Jamison Square, in Portland’s Pearl District. Photo by Isabelle Groc.

Art credit: Children playing in Portland’s Pearl District.


Art credit: Children playing in Portland’s Pearl District. Photo by Isabelle Groc.
Brenda knew Springfield, Missouri, before she eventually moved there to get help at The Kitchen, Inc., the city's largest homeless shelter. She finished junior high and high school in this mid-sized city (pop. 150,000), which is set within a largely rural region. Before she arrived at the shelter, her life had been a series of ups and downs—mostly downs, to hear her tell the story.

Before returning home to live with her aging parents in a rural community not far from Springfield, Brenda married, had two children, got divorced, and then experienced a number of abusive relationships. For a time she had lived in West Virginia: "I made a bad choice to go out there with my boyfriend, and it was a really bad, bad situation," she says. When asked if she was abused, the answer was: "Emotionally, yes. And sexually, yes, and verbally, yes." Brenda's details are gut-wrenching to listen to. Upon leaving, she says, "The only place I had to live was with my Mom and Dad."

Once she was living with her parents, she discovered that her husband did not, in fact, have custody of her two children, now ages 14 and 18: "I saved all my money to get a bus ticket (out of town) to get the girls. I brought them back," she says. "They wanted to be with
Homelessness beyond the big cities

José Adrian Tenafha lives with other homeless men and women in a tent city in Ocean County, New Jersey. His encampment is one of several erected in the woods near towns along the Jersey Shore.

People who are homeless in rural America rarely fit the national stereotype. While some are literally homeless, the majority are living in extremely precarious housing situations. They are often moving from one overcrowded, or barely affordable, housing situation to another, often doubling up or tripling up with family or friends.

Some sleep in vehicles or in other improvised housing. Some camp in isolated areas and some are families who are facing foreclosure and imminent eviction from their homes.

The rural homeless are often less visible than their urban counterparts, partly because of lower population densities in rural areas and the scarcity of social services and shelter programs to identify and assist them. Although the rural homeless are not as concentrated or as visible as the urban homeless,
proportionally there may be more of them in
many rural areas.
As a whole, the nation’s rural population has
higher income, lower employment, and higher
poverty rates than urban and suburban Ameri-
cans. Many rural Americans have experienced
economic downturns not seen since the Great
Depression, with dwindling populations and
growing fiscal problems. Remote and farm-de-
dendent counties appear to be facing especially
difficult challenges.
Poverty rates have been consistently higher in
nonmetropolitan areas. Of the 386 persistently
poor counties—those with 20 percent or more of
their populations living in poverty as measured
in the 1970 through 2000 censuses—349 are
nonmetropolitan. The majority are in parts of
the U.S. where poverty primarily reflects
conditions among racial or ethnic minority
groups or the predominantly white popula-
tion of the Southern Highlands, mostly the
Vlgheny and Cumberland Plateau counties of
Kentucky and West Virginia, plus parts of the
Osage Plateau and Ouachita Mountains west
of the Mississippi.
Unfortunately, the social problems of rural
Americans have received less attention than their
more visible urban counterparts. Many Ameri-
cans view life in rural communities as bucolic,
but this image is partially maintained by the
visibility of our rural citizens in need.
Estimates from different sources show that in
the late 1990s at least 2.3 million, and perhaps
as many as 3.5 million, people experienced
homelessness at some time during an average
year. Rural homelessness is estimated to make
up anywhere from seven to 14 percent of this
population. Helping America’s Homeless, a widely
cited Urban Institute study by Martha Burt
and others, puts the number at nine percent.
The rural homeless are less likely to live on the
street or in a shelter, and are more likely to live
in car, or with relatives or friends in overcrowded
or substandard housing.
The problems inherent in these estimates
begin with the definition of the homeless and
the techniques used in counting them. The most
popular counting technique is a census of the
individuals staying in shelters and recognized
congregation sites. This method may be
acceptable for getting estimates of the homeless
population in large metropolitan areas, it does
not do justice to rural homeless populations.
One of the main problems in rural areas is that
the homeless become invisible, or unrecognizable
in rural settings. Homeless shelters and service
providers are few and far between, often leaving
only family and limited community assistance
available to those in need.

To date, a significant number of national,
state, and local organizations have endorsed the
call for the U.S. Department of Housing and
Urban Development to adopt a definition of
homelessness that is broader and would more
accurately reflect the experience of homeless
persons in rural areas. Currently, the HUD
definition excludes people who are forced to
stay with others temporarily (those who are
doubled-up”). These include Brenda and her
daughters and people staying in motels because
they have no other options.

In search of help
The rural homeless like Brenda are often forced
to move in search of help. In smaller communi-
ties across the U.S., the homeless have become
more visible in places that are ill-prepared to
assist them. Debates are under way in many of
these communities concerning the provision of
homeless services and the so-called "attraction" of
this population. Today, the connection between
residency and public assistance has reemerged as
states and localities worry about providing services
that may be a magnet for the homeless.
More than half of the homeless in Springfield
who were surveyed in 1999 came from the
southwest region of Missouri, and two-thirds
originated from within the state. Overall, three-
quarters came from the four states of Arkansas,
Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.
Springfield is the retailing and service center
of the Ozarks. The area served by the large multi-
service homeless shelter extends throughout a
large portion of this mostly rural state. If such a
phenomenon as homeless social-service magnet
exists, this organization would be one.
However, the vast majority of homeless indi-
viduals were not traveling to the shelter from
other states. They originated in the predomi-
nantly rural communities of the wider region,
where social services—especially for those fleeing
domestic violence or other crises—were very
limited. A small regional network of agencies
does exist, but they all reported insufficient funds
to support all service provision requests.
The rural and small town homeless are differ-
ent from the homeless in larger cities. For one
Violence prevalent
The problem involves more than the lack of a

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Things to Be Done
The rural homeless face many special challenges:
• A dispersed and often hidden population
• Limited transportation, making outreach and coordination difficult
• Federal programs that favor the homeless in larger metropolitan areas
• Lack of affordable housing and rental assistance
• Nonexistent or shrinking mental health and drug and alcohol services
• Limited capacity for resource development, including grant writing and management

To meet some of these challenges rural areas need:
• Formal coordination of outreach centers and engagement teams
• Access to information on best practices
• Grant-writing and management assistance

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In print. Homelessness in Rural America: Policy and Practice. Paul A. Rollinson and John T. Paedock. 2006. Haworth Press. The book describes shelter intake data in 1,480 cases of homeless households using the services of The Kitchen, Inc., in Springfield, Missouri, in 1999. One-fifth of the narratives (296 cases) were reviewed to learn about pathways to homelessness, and another 10 percent of the homeless (30 cases) were interviewed multiple times and cross-referenced with key informants to create a triangulated qualitative analysis of the nature of rural homelessness.


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